

# From Shanty to Shanti—Teaching Australian Literature in India

CA. CRANSTON  
University of Tasmania

From February to April this year I undertook an Australian Studies Fellowship from the Australia-India Council (AIC) to teach at the University of Madras, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The Australian Studies section at the University was started ten years ago (1998). This essay aims to address areas suggested for discussion by the ASAL ‘Australian Literature in a Global World’ Conference, along with some of the similar Governmental aims of the AIC, such as ‘raising awareness of Australia in India’, and ‘supporting Australian studies in India’. Consequently, the essay will be specific as to what constitutes ‘the world’. Indeed, it will be specific as to what constitutes India, focusing solely on Tamil Nadu, in the South.

The first part will comment on ASAL topics such as the ‘selling of Australian literature to the world’; the topic raises concerns for developing nations regarding the privileging of consumers as text affordability and availability impacts on the OzLit research scope available to the local, Tamil Nadu, students. The paper then discusses the experiences encountered when Australian Literature is ‘sold’ and taught at an overseas institution. This second part will give examples of an attempt to ‘Translate the local to the world’, along with subsequent re-readings of canonical 19<sup>th</sup> century texts by Tamil students which challenge Anglo-centric assumptions.

Based on this brief period in Tamil Nadu, the paper will also offer suggestions as to why indigenous writing is popular with Tamil students. All together, the paper is comprised of observations made during the application of pedagogical practices; but it concludes with a cautionary note concerning the academic value of selling Australian texts to ‘the world’. Part of that caution is directed at institutional gatekeepers who will need to go beyond simply theorising about post-colonial interpretations of the text and instead be accepting of its praxis, where Australian texts will be transformed by unfamiliar cultural capital, and will seldom be controlled by its authors’ historical or geographical frameworks.

The job description of the Fellowship at Madras University was to teach 27 second-year MA students, five hours a week, for two months. The subject: ‘Australian Literature, Text and Context’.

## Part 1: Selling Australian Literature to the World

### Reading Context: Place and History

There are of course two contexts when teaching Australian Literature on another continent. For me (as an ecocritic) teaching Australian literature out of its geographical context required investigation into how it connected with this new context—and that meant engaging with the local. For instance, there’s local knowledge to be read in the naming, timing, and placement of Madras University itself. Although Madras is now known as Chennai, the University retains its original

name. In so doing it refers readers to one of the first instances of corporate globalisation: old Madras was the headquarters of the British East India Company.<sup>1</sup> But the University's date of establishment—1857—situates it between histories. Depending on one's historical, and 'local', orientation the date situates a reader's bias, either as a) the Sepoy Rebellion, or as b) the struggle for independence from Britain.

### **Language Nationalism**

As for the location of the Australian Studies Centre at the University, it is situated opposite Anna Square. It is an artful placement, as if to remind contemporary scholars that Tamil and English, not Hindi and English, are the official languages here.

Anna Square was named for C.N. Annadurai<sup>2</sup> (1909-1969), a caste socialist and Tamil nationalist playwright and novelist<sup>3</sup>, who became Chief Minister of South India in 1967. In the interest of keeping ancient Tamil literature alive and relevant he fronted the movement for language independence from Northern India. The memorial (Anna died unexpectedly, in 1969) served as a reminder that here one was not only teaching 'Indians' but Indians who regarded themselves primarily as 'Tamilians', one of the major groups in the ancient Dravidian language family. This group, through a cultural war for the continuance of its language and literature, distinguished itself from other Indians. Which is why an attempt to embrace the local by uttering the better-known Hindi greeting 'Namaste' instead of the Tamil 'Vanakkam' is to misread the identity politics of a country where state boundaries were reconfigured according to linguistic lines, under the State Reorganization Act of 1956.

The local relationship between linguistic imperialism and geographical boundaries was helpful back in the classroom when it came to exploring Australian 19<sup>th</sup> century texts, aimed at writing back at Britain, such as Lawson's use of the vernacular and his insisting (for instance, in 'The Drover's Wife') that the Drover 'is an Australian, and so is she'.

### **The Affordability of Selling to the World: Mary Martin and Selling Indian Literature to Australia**

One of this Conference's topics features the 'selling of Australian literature to the world'. This essay takes the idea of selling literature literally, rather than assuming it's the selling of the idea. The fact that Madras University offers an Adjunct Professorship to teach Australian literature indicates that someone has already sold (and bought) the idea.<sup>4</sup> But materially backing up those ideas raises concerns for developing nations. First and Third World fiscal inequities indicate that selling Australian literature 'to the world' translates as selling Australian literature to the English-as-a-first-language world. And this will remain so, for so long as books are published in Australia at First World rates of exchange. As for the Indian student in a state university affordability of texts impacts on the genre studied. The genres of the novel and drama are largely unaffordable; short stories and poems, however, can be photocopied.

The affordability of texts was one Mary Martin (1915-1973) capitalised on in the 1960s when she set up a Mary Martin Bookshop in India. Her relevance here is that in a reversal of the process of 'selling Australia literature to the world', Martin sold India

to Australia. The way she did this was to send Indian books to Australia in order to be professionally typeset. These were then returned to India to be printed (and because of the Indian currency) to retail at cheaper than Australian local prices (Lewis 134).<sup>5</sup>

Martin's entrepreneurship raises some questions: Is it possible to reverse the process and publish Australian literature in India, thus bringing it in line with the Indian local market? Oxford India University Press has a branch in Chennai but satisfying demand/cost ratios would involve India-wide consensus regarding which set texts to reprint. Or is it possible to reduce Asian consumer costs by selling the idea of Australia through its remaindered books? This too would require cooperative measures amongst the interested parties. In any event, who would finance freight costs and other such undertakings to promote Australian Literature? The Publishers? Universities? DFAT? The Arts Council? ASAL? I do not know. I do know that a systematic supply of texts to key sites is crucial if the contemporary novel is to get a fair showing in an Other-than-Australian tertiary setting. State students simply cannot afford to own a copy. So although David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) was one of the set texts, students could study selected chapters only, in order to comply with copyright restrictions.

### **What kind of fare are we 'selling' to the world?**

The Australian unit was co-taught, with drama and the novel taught by Madras University staff. My assigned area was the short-story and poetry:

Barbara Baynton	'The Chosen Vessel'
Henry Lawson	'The Drover's Wife'; 'Brighten's Sister-in-Law'
Marcus Clarke	'Pretty Dick'
David Malouf	'Bad Blood'
Beverly Farmer	'Among Pigeons'
Judah Waten	'Making a Living'
Judith Wright	'The Weeping Fig'
John Morrison	'The Night Shift'
Katherine Susannah Prichard	'Marlene'
Archie Weller	'Johnny Blue'
Les Murray	'The Conquest'; 'Immigrant Voyage'
Kenneth Slessor	'Five Bells'
Kevin Gilbert	'Mister Man'
Kath Walker	'We are Going'; 'No More Boomerang';
Gadgaju Ways	
Henry Kendall	'The Last of his Tribe'
Judith Wright	'At Cooloolah'; 'For New England'
Jenny Strauss	'What Women Want'
Louis Esson	'The Shearer's Wife'
Henry Lawson	'Ned's Delicate Way'; 'The Old Bark School'
AB Paterson	'Clancy of the Overflow'
John Farrell	'Australia'
Anonymous	'Botany Bay'; 'Moreton Bay'
Bush Ballads	
Ee Tiang Hong	'Coming To'
Uyen Loewald	'Be Good, Little Immigrants'

As you can see, the list is ambitious; it leans towards the canonical, and to a degree, the dated. And it does so because many of these works are available in anthologies and on SETIS. Which suggests that, for the consumer in the Developing World, the dated canonical texts are a plus. Internet resources and copyright legislation favour studies in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. Because it is a free resource 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian Literature might be easier for ASAL to sell, though internet use was not second-nature to students and staff I encountered.<sup>6</sup> And although the AIC subsidises Madras University's access to the AustLit database during the Fellowship my feeling is that if students are to engage at an informed level with Australian Studies, the AustLit database ought to be accessible to the University year-round. It might be possible to subscribe Developing World institutions that have Australian Studies programs, under a single password, thereby sharing the costs between them. (See below for Kerry Kilner's (the AustLit Executive Manager) initiative in this field).<sup>7</sup> Co-sharing costs is hardly a businesslike proposition for AustLit but it is an option that addresses the wider aims of ASAL and the AIC. After all (to quote a colleague) it cannot be in the national interest to have the nation represented abroad by mostly 1890s and 1960s writing. Though highly selective and very limited, an example of selling Australian literature (and avoiding condemning Asia to the 19th century) is the online Australian Literature Compendium, which expects to produce an e-journal and teaching guides for local and international Australian Studies Centres.<sup>8</sup>

## Part 2: Translating the local to the World

As for 'selling' Australian literature in the classroom we began with Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' rather than the scheduled 'The Chosen Vessel' for the reason that Baynton's story is generally considered to be a writing back of that particular work.<sup>9</sup> Lawson, then, was the first attempt to 'Translate the local to the world'.<sup>10</sup>

We began, as you do, with the image of the stunted rotten apple tree and the snake, with Lawson's ironic use of Christian symbolism and portrayal of Australia as an inverted Eden.<sup>11</sup> Pedagogically, the concern was whether students would grasp the allusions and the irony—as irony is notoriously difficult to translate. And there *were* a few furrowed brows, many of which had a bindi in between them. Then one student mentioned that we seemed to be talking a lot about Christianity. The comment took me off-guard. Australian literature was, in my mind, comfortably secular. There was only one writer in the syllabus who was a self-proclaimed Christian and that was Les Murray. About 86% of Tamilians are Hindu; only 6% are Christian. There is nevertheless a strong Christian presence in the city; the tomb of the patron saint of scepticism, Doubting Thomas, is in Chennai; you will even find the occasional auto-driver ready to (Holy) Spirit you away in his auto.



**Fig. 1** Auto-rickshaw driver (Photo: CA.Cranston)

Given the historical reality and political ambiguity inherent in Indian and Australian colonial missionary narratives ('Look at me and you will see what the Bible can do', said David Unaipon, the son of the first convert at the Congregationalist mission at Raukkan, in South Australia (Kleinert and Neale 724))<sup>12</sup> a sensitive accommodation of the student's concern was justifiable. Imagine the discomfiture when I realised the next session was on Bayton's 'The Chosen Vessel': a title replete with Catholic imagery, incantations, and blessed visions. It could not get worse. Except that it could. Coming up in the third session was Marcus Clarke's short story 'Pretty Dick', also ironic in its treatment of Christianity, its last line reading 'God had taken him home'. Clarke's attitude (and Lawson's and Baynton's) that Christianity is a 'delusion',<sup>13</sup> springs as much from post-Darwinian thinking as it does from any notion of an Australian, Godless landscape. I had taken for granted the Judeo-Christian basis for

Australian culture; the Asian context had highlighted and highjacked the subject matter by foregrounding religion.

### **Reading Back: Challenging Anglo-centric readings**

Besides, for these students, finding a snake in a bark hut was not necessarily a 19<sup>th</sup> century occurrence replete with religious irony. By applying the local to the literature it could read as a viable empirical account, as in this article, ‘Playground for rats and snakes in Mogappair’, published in the local paper the same date we were discussing ‘The Drover’s Wife’:<sup>14</sup>

Extract]...[A]uthorities of the Government Boys High School on Sixth Block, Mogappair East, have allowed a vast portion of the school ground to house snakes and rodents....

Families living near the school compound have found snakes and other reptiles visiting their bathrooms and kitchens.

“One night, I found a snake coiled in a corner of our bathroom. Since then I have not picked up the courage to visit the toilet at nights,” resident recounted. [*sic*]

“We had to call the Fire and Rescue services personnel when a snake entered our house a few months ago,” lamented Murali [D]haran, a resident. (*The New Indian Express Chennai*, 19 February 2008: 2)

Which brings us to the second part of this paper: attempting to translate the (Australian) local, and students reading back from *their* local, in their study of the Baynton story. In her biography on Baynton, Penne Hackforth-Jones comments that ‘The Chosen Vessel’ (1896) draws a parallel ‘between the human condition and the sheep’ (62). But reading in place, in an Asian context, meant that students shifted focus from the sheep (Christian symbol), to the cow. You will recall the story begins with a bush mother reluctantly attempting to separate a calf from its mother. The line reads: ‘She laid the stick and her baby on the grass while she untied the rope that tethered the calf.’

There can be no greater discrepancy, physically and symbolically, between the place of the cow in the streets of the cities of Tamil Nadu, and the place of the cow in Australia where the image of peace (shanti) that is inspired by the literary pastoral is ‘turned on its head’ and becomes instead the pastoral industry.





**Fig. 2** Chennai Cows (left, photo: CA.Cranston)  
Slaughterhouse (right) Source: Slaughterhouse source: Compassionate  
Action for Animals, [http://www.exploreveg.org/issues/i/inside\\_slaughterhouse.jpg](http://www.exploreveg.org/issues/i/inside_slaughterhouse.jpg)

While the stated mission of the AIC was ‘raising awareness of Australia in India’ and ‘supporting Australian studies in India’ there was the personal unstated wish to engage students, to get them to enjoy the literature. So while Baynton’s context obliged us to pursue the Christian imagery in the story the students were invited to practice reader-response theory, an approach that emphasises ‘the relationship between text and reader and reader and text’ (Cuddon 726-728). Their reading, informed by their local cultural constructions of the cow, was that in Hindu mythology not only is the cow sacred, it is regarded as the mother-incarnate of us all, one who gives us milk, and is never slaughtered. She is both a concrete symbol, and material reality, of the principle of non-violence (Renou 18). ‘The Chosen Vessel’, read within the discourse of non-violence and motherhood (there are five motherhood groups presented in the story), reached bathetic proportions, laced with the darkest irony for which the students needed no explanation. The two-part story became a defensible reading of a dialogue that included Christian and Hindu components.<sup>15</sup> This approach (reading the local in relation to each others’ local) seemed less imperialistic; it handed power back to the students who after all had only ever known Australia through representation.<sup>16</sup>

I, however, had no excuse. I was physically in their context: and this was a nation fiercely proud of its literature. We were, after all, across from Anna Square where 15 million people had farewelled the body of the man who fought against language imperialism. This he did so that Tamilians would not forget how to read their own classical, Dravidian literature in their native tongue. Contemporary readers could still access the literature of The Sangam Age, an Age ranging from about 300 BC to AD 300, which I was reading, translated by A.K. Ramanujan, in *Poems of Love and War* (2008). Our (teacher and students) subject positions in relation to each others’ literature rendered both sides vulnerable. Students guided me through the five geographical sites of Sangam Literature, each site complete with a particular ecology and with specific, associated emotional states.<sup>17</sup> When it came to discussing 19<sup>th</sup> century constructions of landscape, students were thus able to engage more when Lawson’s and Baynton’s constructions of landscape were examined alongside local representations in Sangam literature (an ‘Indianisation’ of the Australian landscape). Students concluded that Baynton’s landscape belonged to the Paalai<sup>18</sup>, or Wasteland, a

'landscape [that] emerges when other landscapes wither under the heat of the burning sun; it is a landscape associated with the theme of separation, one which occurs when love is subject to external pressures that drive the lovers apart'. The comparative approach created an exchange of knowledge. And this confluence of literatures found a satisfying dual referent in the material world of the wastelands of India, where '...hybrid varieties of Eucalyptus ... are used in the reclamation of wastelands' (Rao 59).

Clearly, 'translating the local' was a two-way process in this situation. The Asian context presented alternative readings, and between us the text became an amalgam of Asian and western frameworks rather than an imposition of ideas.<sup>19</sup> To return to the topic of the Conference, if we are to sell Australian literature to 'the world' then that part of the world must be encouraged to exercise a sense of ownership. It will do that anyway. And we must be prepared to negotiate our own reading positions and acceptance of interpretative nuances when the prodigal literature returns for marking (as with thesis submissions), or for publication (as with journal articles). Whether or not we, who are situated in the Australian local context, are able to release ownership of the text is another matter.

For instance, back in Baynton's local context, could the Chennai reading be sustained? As a class we had discovered the usefulness, and the constraints, of literary theory; was there any way that the Indian reading could be justified in Australia? Or were we guilty of vandalism in the pursuit of keeping things interesting? Baynton it turned out had links, at least, with the idea of India. In preparation for her 1905 trip to England, she reinvented her father's (Robert Kilpatrick) occupation from carpenter to Bengal Lancer (Hackforth-Jones 6 91). Certainly, there were 'attempts to recruit for the East India Company's Bengal army in New South Wales' (Kingston 39). And one assumes that if you are going to fib about the East India Company to the English, you would do well to learn a little about the place. Baynton had the time and opportunity to do so; we know that the first port of call for Australians heading to England was Galle, Ceylon. And even though the identities of Ceylon and India are separate both fell under the East India Company's imperial umbrella. Baynton's time in Colombo is noted in 'Australian Spring' where Baynton wrote of 'the insolence of the crows of Colombo'; but nevertheless found that '[t]he rapacity and cruelty of Australian crows leave the Colombo crow a gentleman...' (Krimmer and Lawson 329-330). The Indian/Australian comparisons continued later when Baynton wrote verse titled 'In R āma. The Bush Mother', a reference to the *R ām āyana*, in which R āma travels to Lanka (Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka) to rescue his abducted wife, Sita. Baynton's interest is more specifically stated when World War I brought a crisis of belief to the fore. She:

dug deeper into Hindu religion to find some answer to the spectre of death that seemed to ride with her, blending the images of R āma, the Hindu prince of truth and beauty,<sup>20</sup> with the Christian figures of her youth... (Hackforth-Jones 136-7)

Explored through a New Historicist framework, this suggests Baynton certainly had an interest in things that could be broadly described as Indian, but all of which *post-dates* the publication of 'The Chosen Vessel' (1902). What the students' reading back suggests, however, is that her interest existed *prior* to the fabrication of her father's career as a Bengal Lancer. The current blind spot that Australians have to India is



contrary to the 19<sup>th</sup> century responses when ‘A vast network of imperial connections in government, administration, the army, the church, the law, education, and enterprise, extended from India to the Australian colonies’ (Kingston 36). Baynton’s interest in things Indian is therefore less surprising within that context.

I will come back to student-response to Lawson and Baynton, but first a comment about Marcus Clarke’s short story, ‘Pretty Dick’, about a young boy lost in the bush. Given that ‘[f]or most of the nineteenth century and ... by virtue of its position on the crossroads of the world, ... India was part of Australia’s trade, communications, and sense of the wider world’ (Kingston 36), the nineteenth century was bound to throw up connections between the two countries. But I was still surprised to find so much of it textually and contextually. I have mentioned the importance of language to both colonised nations, and we are all familiar with language-borrowings from India, words such as pyjamas, jungle, catamaran; along with gunny bag, and verandah, dungaree, bandicoot, bungalow, dinghy, buggy, cot, shampoo, coolie (Kingston 38).

In Marcus Clarke’s story I came across the word *puggaree*. As Pretty Dick, lost on the hilltop, looks down into the valley he spots Mr Gaunt, the overseer; he’s recognisable because of the ‘white puggaree on his hat’ (Lord 70). This Sanskrit word<sup>21</sup> was known to only one student in the class. I was now placed in the situation of returning a word to its linguistic group, but it, in turn, rebounded helix-like, and revealed an aspect of Australian culture.



**Fig. 3** left: Puggaree, Fort St George Museum (photo CA. Cranston) right: <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-uniforms/puggaree.htm> (right)

For the puggaree (a turban with a flap to cover the neck; fig. 3, left) apparently was appropriated and modified into the pleated hatband of the Australian slouch hat. The hat on the top right shows how the lower scarf, or *pugari*, can cover the back of the neck. This hat reputedly once belonged to Marcus Clarke.

The semiotics of the puggaree encouraged deviation from the original reading list; it provided entry into a discussion of iconic images of Australian Nationalism<sup>22</sup> such as the importance of ANZAC day, as experienced through Geoff Page’s poem ‘Christ at Gallipoli’, and Peter Weir’s film, *Gallipoli* (1981).<sup>23</sup> It was not a battle the students had heard of so they weren’t to know that an estimated 1,370 Indians died at Gallipoli.

Once again it was possible to engage students through cultural comparisons: Why were the Australians there? Why were the Indians? As far as connections went, we seemed to be on a roll.

In fact I began to think I was suffering a version of Stendhal's Syndrome:<sup>24</sup> except that instead of physiological distress due to a surfeit of art, I was suffering from over-exposure to cultural and historical cross-overs. Everywhere seemed saturated with particulars of the Oz local. Some references, such as those concerning Mary Martin, were defensible. Others provided playful linguistic portraits of Australian colloquialisms, as with the shop name (She[i]la) of this ladies tailor.



**Fig. 4 Tailor, Nungambakkam (Photo: CA.Cranston)**

These examples demonstrate a frame of mind influenced by one's embodied local—be it Sydney or Broome—which is bound to influence the way in which 'Australia' is interpreted, as well as to select surreptitiously what presents itself for interpretation in an out-of-context situation. For instance, there exist direct links between British colonial Madras and convictism in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania being my particular local). Take a short stroll from the University to Fort St George museum and one is brought face to face with a full-length portrait of Lord Hobart, Governor of Madras from 1793-1798.<sup>25</sup> The museum narratives contain their own blind spots that rendered invisible the histories that informed the embodied local of this reader. Yet here we were, both claiming 'Hobart' as a text. And while it is true that a painting of Charles O'Hara Booth (1800-1851) was not to be found in the museum presumably because he was just an ensign when he joined the 53<sup>rd</sup> Regiment at Madras (1816-1819), Booth

went on to become Commandant of convicts at Port Arthur in 1833. The museum did, however, have a painting of Sir William Denison, ‘the last lieutenant-governor to preside over the [convict] System’ in Van Diemen’s Land (Hughes 533). Denison was later appointed Governor of Madras (on 22 Jan 1861). It was an unexpected confluence of texts and contexts, topped off by the quaint domestic detail that one of Denison’s Worcester dinner sets ended up in the home of the author under discussion, Barbara Baynton (Hackforth-Jones 86).

### Part 3: Indigenous Writing in a Global Context

I turn now to the third and most sensitive issue in this paper, which addresses the conference topic of ‘indigenous writing in a global context’, where I offer a personal observation of why indigenous writing is popular with Tamil students. (It is important to remember that the representative sample was based on exposure to about 40 students across various institutions, who were interested in Australian indigenous writing). On examining the Madras students on the work of Lawson and Baynton, the general reception was one of approval: it was good, students said, ‘to see white writers portraying the hardship of aboriginal characters’.

Again, my Anglo-centric assumptions left me dumbfounded. I thought I had covered context. But I had not thought to mention that the drover’s and the shearer’s wives were settler Australians. Referring to the reader-response framework, students asked where in the text it said that they were white? Further discussion revealed that students could not visualise white women subjected to such poverty, and enduring such trauma. White, after all, was the colour of privilege.

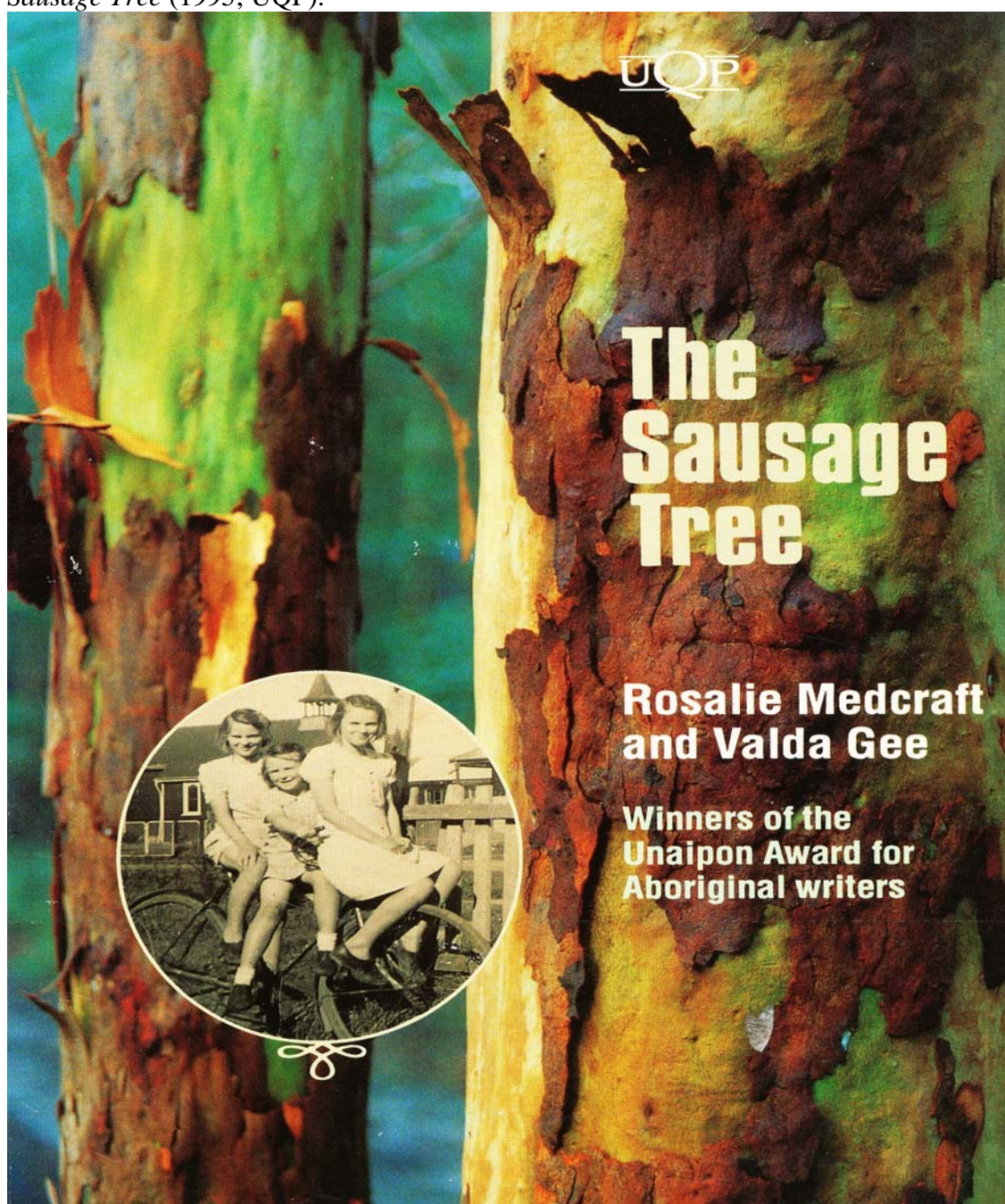
What the above demonstrates is how the reading of colour (in which the skin is a text) shifts with the context. Given Australia’s historical record, there is a fine line between discussing skin colour *preferences*, and being called a racist. Shift contexts, back to Chennai and you will find that within Indian communities degrees of colour—dark, fair, wheatish—are open, daily topics in the matrimonial classifieds. Here are six, taken at random, from *The Hindu*, and the *New Indian Express*.

CASTE, RELIGION, Language no bar. Wanted a tall slim fair kind cosmo Indian bride for SW Manager MCA 18L intop US Co at Bangalore 33/177/70	RC Tamil wheatish normal body Box No BA- 271, THE HINDU, Bangalore- 560001	FAIR BEAUTIFUL Bengali girl 23/161 B.Tech SWE NIIT Chennai caste no bar xxxxxxxxx Box No: HB-1815, THE HINDU, Chennai - 600 002.
ATHER MUDHALIAR mother Warriar seeks fair bride from reputed family for son 28/174 BE 7L pa caste no bar. Call:xxxxxxx	MATCH FOR Hindu Christian boy 12th 30, 5.6 wheatish working permanently in reputed	RCSC 23/158 MSc IT fair born & brought-up in Chennai, employed in Chennai. Email: xxxxxxx



	company seeks alliance from fair & ...	
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The fairer the skin, the more value is attached to it. Billboards advertise laser lightening procedures to enhance one's marriage marketability. And while students greeted the exceptional fellow on the Australian \$50 note as an acceptable representation of an indigene, they were less accepting of the Palawa authors who won the David Unaipon award that was set up in his honour. Two of the Palawas, Rosalie Medcraft and Valda Gee, are featured on the cover of their winning entry, *The Sausage Tree* (1995; UQP).



**Fig. 5** Cover of *The Sausage Tree* (1995)  
Winner of the David Unaipon Award

For the Madras University students (I found no exceptions), the authors' skin colour suggested privilege, and as such disrupted the identity politics of the blackness collective, all of which generated category anxiety for the students. The upshot was that this predisposition, or colour bond, above cultural origins, seemed to create a felt sense of identity with a particular image of Australian Indigenes.

Granted, the appeal of autochthonous writing—from American, Canadian, or Australian indigenes—extends beyond Tamil Nadu. But where were the students studying the work of Richard Flanagan? Tim Winton? Elizabeth Jolley? Christina Stead? Not here. Sally Morgan, Kim Scott, yes; along with Roberta Sykes and Mudrooroo—a further indication of the need for resources for students *and* graduate supervisors. Students felt they did not have much in common with settler (white) Australians; instead the feeling was that their skin gave them access to the work of *a particular image* of Australian indigenes. The inappropriateness of this kind of misinformed reader-response was played out at the 1995 Adelaide ASAL conference, when a paper drawing parallels between 'Dalit and Aboriginal Texts' was heatedly rejected by an Aboriginal Elder in the audience who pointed out that there had never been a caste system amongst the Aboriginal tribes.<sup>26</sup>

So far this paper has managed to address cross-cultural issues without once mentioning Mumbai-born, post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha. The pedagogical intersections between myself and Madras University students could, however, be clarified using Bhabha's conceptual vocabulary. But clarifying the concepts will not address the problems that arise when countries-other-than-Australia elect to study (indeed, are *encouraged* to study) Australian texts out of context. 'Context' here includes the material environment; the cross-cultural encouragement in the theoretical milieu, however, is not always accompanied by sufficient resources to help situate literary texts in their sociological, historical, and political contexts. If as Bhabha states, the coloniser's cultural meanings are open to transformation by the colonised population (a kind of reader-response approach that acknowledges inbuilt power relations and cultural differences), then the well-meaning mentor, charged with the 'selling of Australian literature to the world', must be open to transformations. The pedant can be amused by innocuous transformations of cultural meaning such as the 'Trial Room' signs in some Chennai department stores indicating the ladies' changing room, or the 'Retiring Room' signs at railway stations. But some transformations are less innocuous, as shown in the students' readings of canonical texts, and in their (mis)readings of skin colour as a specific text. Our in-class reader-response exercises affirmed Bhabha's notion that the meanings of colonial texts cannot be controlled by the authors. Taking that tack, this would include readings of (post-colonial) Australian indigenous texts by (post-colonial) Tamil readers. And I have offered two examples of how those readings could be very confronting. To return to the topic of the Conference, it would seem that an organisation that advocates globalising Australian literature, along with the academics within that organisation who will be acting as theses examiners and journal referees, will be faced with several challenges. Those challenges include negotiating reading positions. For if an Australian text has ventured beyond its boundaries (as it has been encouraged to do) then the current set of cultural filters we possess is likely to be inadequate, especially if the text is better travelled than are we. On the other hand, if we maintain that our (Australian) cultural filters are the most appropriate for the task of reading Australian literature, have we allowed the

text to travel? Are we not refusing to relinquish ownership? What challenges does a thesis-at-second-hand from a resource-scarce country present when offered for examination? What are the social and political implications for those students without the access, without the finances to situate themselves in geographical or virtual context, who cannot afford to travel and trace the complexities of the text? And what, too, of the challenge presented by the language in which texts are written? As the students and scholars of previous British colonies present their work as ESL students, do we insist on marking at an Australian-English standard, or recognise the equally important development of Indian-English? In which case we might need to know a little something about Indian-English. And we might need to acknowledge that the degree candidate has at least two sets of language knowledge and cultural frameworks, compared to the examiner's often single set. The challenges are real; and because the selling of Australian literature to the world is a proposed academic activity, it carries with it accountability far beyond textual boundaries.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1640, the town of Madraspatnam was used by British trade; the official centre of settlement was at Fort St. George.

<sup>2</sup> C.N. Annadurai (nicknamed Arignar Anna: 'Annhaa' means elder brother).

<sup>3</sup> In 1942 Annadurai launched the Tamil weekly, *Dravida Nadu*. In 1957 and later in 1966 he started the English-language weeklies *Homeland* and *Home Rule*. Among his creative works are the novels *Or Iravu* (One Night), and *Velaikkari* (Servant-maid), which were later made into movies. Most stories revolve around social causes like the exploitation of women. *Arya Mayai* (Aryan Illusion) attacks the Brahmin/Aryan combine.

<sup>4</sup> Professor C.T. Indra established the Australian Studies Centre in 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Martin states 'I want to sell Indian books to Australian libraries, universities, schools and private individuals' (Lewis 134). Her best University book customer was Monash University (Lewis 159).

<sup>6</sup> Although IT Parks are booming in Chennai, actual IT resources in the State setting are under pressure, again partly because of economics, availability, and accessibility. Students were introduced to free-access publications *JASAL* and *Australian Humanities Review*. But the time involved in loading and down-loading meant few were keen to repeat the process.

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to Kerry Kilner's 'In the Age of the Internet: Australian Literature and Research Practices' which is an invaluable aid to resources for distanced students. Kilner included a password to *AustLit: The Resource for Australian Literature*, which enables students free-access for the next two years.

<sup>8</sup> With Dr Lyn Gallaher (ABC Radio National) and Prof. Catherine Cole (RMIT).

<sup>9</sup> The piece is also considered to be 'heavily autobiographical' without reference to Lawson's work in *Barbara Baynton Between Two Worlds* (Hackforth-Jones 62). Similarly, Hackforth-Jones relies on 'The Chosen Vessel' as a means 'to reconstruct Barbara's early married life' (167-8).

<sup>10</sup> Or rather, my second. I taught Australian literature and cinema in Austria, at the Alps-Adriatic University in Klagenfurt (2004). The students there were well versed in the story telling and symbolism associated with western, Christian traditions.

<sup>11</sup> To demonstrate the irony of the Christian symbolism, Lawson's 'The New Religion' was also set. The journalistic piece shows a post-Darwinian appeal to self-sufficiency, imperative in the achievement of nationhood. This, Lawson believed, was possible only through economic independence from the Colonial power, but economic independence was undermined by cheap labour and an unproductive landscape.

<sup>12</sup> These narratives can be as diverse as T.G.H. Strehlow's depiction of the Hermannsburg Mission, and Doris Pilkington-Nugi Garimara's depiction of the Moore River Native Settlement in *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996). The history of both countries is filled with well-meaning Christian missionaries. Conversely, Australians have never been subjected to Hinduisation; without the history



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of colonisation Australian students are more apt to approach Indian literature and Hinduism simply as an opportunity for cultural education.

<sup>13</sup> See Marcus Clarke's essay, 'Civilization without Delusion', 1879.

<sup>14</sup> Along with Lawson's short stories, I was reading the *Mahā-Bhārata*. One story tells of Indra confronting Yudhisthira and his dog and explaining that 'he alone is permitted to ascend [to heaven] in bodily form' (Renou 145). Instead of being grateful, Yudhisthira 'stipulates that his dog shall be permitted with him. Indra says sternly, "Heaven has no place for men accompanied by dogs"; but Yudhisthira is unshaken in his resolution, and declines abandoning the faithful animal' (146). Both Yudhisthira and the secular Macquarie (in Lawson's 'That There Dog O' Mine') get their way.

<sup>15</sup> Once again, I misread the subject positions of my students: those from the socialist state of Kerala held a more pragmatic view of the cow than did the Tamilians.

<sup>16</sup> While Australian students in transcultural studies need to be cautioned against automatically appropriating texts into a western framework (the framework they are familiar with), Tamil students possess a bifurcated, or stereoscopic, framework as a result of being conversant in the language of the introduced literature and of their being inheritors of British colonialism. Encouraging them to read from their own local was to initiate knowledgeable comparisons rather than to encourage appropriation.

<sup>17</sup> The geographical thinais are the Kurinchi (mountains, associated with union; and the kurinchi plant); Mullai (forests, associated with waiting; and the Jasmine (mullai) plant); Marutham (cropland, associated with quarrelling; and the Marutam plant); Naithal (seashore, associated with pining; and the water lily plant); and Paalai, the wasteland, which is not a naturally-existing landscape; the wasteland is associated with separation; and the paalai plant).

<sup>18</sup> The paalai (or vepali) tree (botanical name *Wrightia tinctorial*) associated with the Wasteland can be found in Chennai. Its usefulness is pertinent to the discussion because it is held that 'adding a drop of the sap ... preserves milk against curdling, without spoiling its taste' (Rao 63).

<sup>19</sup> As for ownership of the text, students also engaged when reading in-place narratives such as Kate Grenville's 'The Space Between', which is set in Madras.

<sup>20</sup> Hackforth-Jones' reading of Rāma is too generous. In the matter of Rāma's married life, his adherence to truth is less defensible. After his wife Sita is abducted and taken to Lanka Rāma destroys her abductors, but refuses Sita, suspecting that she has been raped. She commits *suti*. The god of fire, Agni, returns Sita, telling Rāma that she is without sin or shame, to which Rāma ('the prince of truth') replies that he never doubted it. He reveals his concern for social approbation saying 'and now her purity has been proved before all men' (Mackenzie 425). But when the queen's virtue is still questioned by the public the husband '[yields] to the wishes of his subjects' (426). Sita is banished to the jungle (pregnant) while Rāma agonises over having slain her abductor, Ravana, because Ravana has a place in the pantheon of gods. Sita raises her two sons in the cave of the poet, Valmiki. Rāma is not allowed a third opportunity to betray his wife: on seeing her sixteen years later the Earth Mother intervenes and takes her, enthroned, into the earth (427). It is Valmiki who authors the *Rāmāyana*, an epic in 24,000 double verses (Renou 155).

<sup>21</sup> From the Sanskrit *parikara*, this Hindu and Urdu term dates from 1665.

<sup>22</sup> The students in turn tried to teach me their National Anthem. India and Australia share 26 January as National holidays.

<sup>23</sup> The film has been criticised for portraying the campaign as a mainly Australian one. In fact among the dead there were around 21,000 British, 10,000 French, 8,700 Australians, 2,700 New Zealanders and 1,370 Indians.

<sup>24</sup> Stendhal's syndrome (named after a 19<sup>th</sup> century author) is a psychosomatic illness characterised by rapid heartbeat, dizziness, and confusion when an individual is exposed to particular works of art; it can also refer to reactions experienced when confronted with a surfeit of choice.

<sup>25</sup> Hobart or Hobart Town was named for Robert Hobart. He was replaced in Madras by Lord Clive (Clive of India).

<sup>26</sup> At the conference, one Australian colleague, citing the language politics of Tamil Nadu asked whether the interest in Indigenous literature was perhaps more about nationalism than with Australian literature. This writer, aware of the divisiveness of the Aryan/Dravidian controversy, would prefer

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those with the political expertise and experience to pursue that idea. My observations remain grounded in pedagogical experience.

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